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AUTHOR Fejes, Fred
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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the media imperialism approach to the study of international communications, which focuses on the processes by which modern communications media have operated to create, maintain, and expand systems of domination and dependency on a world-wide scale. To provide some theoretical basis for the media imperialism approach, the paper presents a brief overview of the dependency model, which analyzes Third World developmental problems in terms of an analysis of the relationships between developed and developing nations. Based on this discussion, new directions for research for media imperialism are outlined. In particular, the paper calls for research on factors and forces operating on a national level to complement research on international factors, for formulation of the cultural issues involved in media imperialism, and for expanded research of non-mass media forms of communication. In conclusion, the paper argues that in the formulation of a theoretical approach to the study of media imperialism, the concept of theory prevalent in most areas of the social sciences is inadequate and that a broader concept of theory should be used. (Author/FL)

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The 'Theory' of Media Imperialism:

Some Comments

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Fred Fejes
Institute of Communications Research
222B Armory
University of Illinois
Champaign, IL 61820

CS205695

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Within the last ten years, the view of what is important in global communications and of the role modern communications play in the development of Third World countries has undergone a drastic change. While during the 1960's communication researchers focused on ways in which modern media could assist in the social development of the nations of Africa, Latin America and Asia, this last decade has witnessed the emergence of an approach to the study of communications and development which has, in many important senses, an entirely different perspective and evaluation of the role of modern communications. Although there is by no means complete agreement, the term "media imperialism" is frequently used to describe the concerns of this new approach. While there have been several attempts to give this term some conceptual precision, distinguishing it, for example, from the broader concept of "cultural imperialism" (Boyd-Barret, 1977), or attempting to define it in terms of levels of generality (Lee, 1978), or in terms of specific media and nations (Tunstall, 1977), on the whole it still remains vague as an analytical concept. That being the case then, for the purposes of this discussion, media imperialism shall be used in a broad and general manner to describe the processes by which modern communication media have operated to create, maintain and expand systems of domination and dependence on a world scale. Similiarly, recent communication research efforts which attempt to study these processes shall be termed collectively the "media imperialism approach." While some may object that such a designation is, on the one hand, too arbitrary and, on the other, too broad and general to be of much use, hopefully the purpose and necessity of making such an initially crude and rough attempt at labelling of a body of work shall

become clear in the course of this discussion.

As has been noted by others (Nordenstreng and Schiller, 1979; Cruise O'Brien, 1979), the media imperialism approach evolved in an attempt to deal with those questions and areas of concern which earlier communication models and thinking generally ignored. In contrast to earlier models which focused on the national level and on social psychological factors in order to determine the ways in which modern communications media could help accelerate the process of development and modernization, the media imperialism approach is based on "an emphasis on global structure, whereby it is precisely the international socio-political system that decisively determines the course of development within the sphere of each nation" (Nordenstreng and Schiller, 1979:7). Whereas earlier models viewed modern communications media as a "tool" for development, the media imperialism approach viewed the media, situated as they were in a transnational context, as an obstacle to any meaningful and well-balanced socio-economic progress that a country may attempt to achieve. Seen in a larger context, the growth of the media imperialism approach is one reflection of the general critical assessment and rejection by many Third World countries of Western models of growth and development of which the earlier communication models were a part. The appearance of the media imperialism approach was matched on the level of international politics by the call by many Third World nations for the restructuring of global communication relationships and flow in order to create a "New International Information Order" as an essential component of a "New International Economic Order."

The major thrust and greatest accomplishment of the work undertaken within the media imperialism approach so far has been an empirical description of the manner in which communications media operate on a global level. As reflected, for example, in works by Schiller (1971), Mattelart (1979), Varis (1973), and others, the research in this area on the whole tends to focus on the operation of transnational agents, either transnational corporations or transnational media industries, and their role in the structuring and flow of media products at an international level. Such works attempt to describe in detail the manner in which such transnational agents dominate the international structure and flow of communications. While attention has been focused on mass media products such as television and film, other aspects and areas of communications such as advertising, satellite communications, educational television and media practices have been examined.

While at the empirical level as represented by such studies, there has been much progress dealing with the concerns of media imperialism, such progress has not been matched at the theoretical level (Mosco and Herman, 1979: Subveti, 1979). Although there has been individual attempts to formulate and analyse media imperialism as a "theory" (Boyd-Barret, 1977; Lee, 1978), on the whole the development of media imperialism as a theoretical approach, in contrast to empirical descriptions of concrete examples of media imperialism, has not formed an important element of the agenda of work in this area. While the reasons for the lack of theoretical development are many and varied, it would seem that one major reason is that the work on media imperialism, much like the work done in other areas of communication research, is linked to the concerns of communication professionals, activists

and policy-makers and to current pressing issues, in this case the international debate over imbalances in the international communication structure and flow. There is, of course, no inherent reason why such close links between research and critical contemporary problems should inhibit the development of theory. There are numerous examples in the social sciences where a practical concern, often with a very narrow and sometimes even insignificant question, has led to profound theoretical developments. Nonetheless, in the case of the media imperialism approach it seems that pressing practical and political concerns have not yet led to any broader theoretical outcomes.

This, of course, should not imply that the empirical progress achieved thus far is of any less value. In contrast to the common complaint that radical and critical researchers and scholars overemphasize the development of a theoretical exactness to the point of irrelevance, the work done on media imperialism, because of its empirical nature, has been eminently clear, accessible and relevant, characteristics which account for the dissemination of its ideas over a wide audience. Nonetheless, it must be recognized that the lack of an explicit and well formulated theoretical basis involves dangers. Without any type of accepted theoretical framework, one is unable to formulate a research agenda, distinguishing those questions and issues that are important and need to be pursued from those less important or that have been over-studied, thus moving the field in general from mere replication of previous work to the breaking of new grounds. Without the development of theory, one finds it much more difficult, on the one hand, to abstract from an empirical study those general ideas that could be applied to a whole different set of data, or, on the other hand, to set

the limits of explanation, to designate what the concept of media imperialism does not explain. Without theory, there is the danger of media imperialism becoming a pseudo-concept, something which can be used to explain everything in general about the media in developing countries and hence nothing in particular. Finally, without theory, there is lacking the critical standpoint and set of standards and concepts by which one can judge and evaluate the research efforts which deal with the issues raised by this approach. A good example of this last point is William Read's study America's Mass Media Merchants (1976). As an empirical work the subject of this study - the expansion of American media overseas - falls within the concerns of the media imperialism approach. But the study's overall purpose and conclusion - to demonstrate that "through the market place system by which America's mass media merchants communicate with foreign consumers, both parties enjoy different, but useful benefits: (Read, 1976:181) - is diametrically opposed to the central thrust of the previous work done in this area. Read's study aptly demonstrates how, lacking an explicit theoretical foundation, the critical outlook that motivated the early progress of this approach can be diluted and its concerns coopted.

To say, however, that media imperialism researchers lack a developed theory does not mean that they do not work within the context of some underlying theoretical concepts and notions. In one sense the research on media imperialism can be situated within the broad tradition of a marxist critique of capitalism in that in the global growth of western communications media researchers see a reflection of the general imperialist expansion of western capitalist societies. Yet it is mistaken to label this approach "marxist" in any detailed and precise sense of the word. While some researchers

identify themselves explicitly as marxists and consciously attempt to develop a specifically marxist analysis of media imperialism, others do not.

While the motivation and sources behind the work on media imperialism are varied, such work perhaps can be best understood both as a research approach and as a theoretical endeavor by putting it in the larger context of the work and thinking done on the questions and problems of Third World development in general over the past decade. Earlier models of the role of communications in the developmental process of course were formulated in the context of more general models of development that defined the entire process as one of "modernization." Within the last ten years, however, such general models have been challenged by a radically different view of the development process. The new view has been generally termed the dependency model. The impact and success of the dependency model in reshaping thinking and work on Third World development has been so fundamental that some commentators see in the emergence of this new model and its replacement of earlier notions of development an example of a kuhnian social scientific revolution (Valnezuela and Valenzuela, 1979). As the emergence and growth of the media imperialism approach can be seen as one aspect of the larger change in development thinking that has occurred with the appearance of the dependency model, some of the basic theoretical notions that underlie the media imperialism approach can be best articulated and understood by presenting a brief overview of the major points of the dependency model.

While the history of the dependency model and a detailed exposition of its argument has been presented elsewhere (see Chilcote and Edelstein, 1974; Portes, 1976, Cardoso, 1977; Valenzuela and Valenzuela, 1979), it is important to note that the dependency models is significantly different

with regards both to its intellectual origins and its analysis of the problems of development than prior theories of modernization. In contrast to such earlier theories which were formulated in research institutions in the countries of Europe and North America and which were based on the experience of industrialization of these countries, the dependency model was initially formulated by a group of Latin American sociologists and economists to explain the failure of previous development strategies in Latin America.

While the modernization theories focused on the internal processes of development and of the role of social values, the dependency theory proceeds from an analysis of the relationships between developed and underdeveloped countries and examines the developmental problems of the Third World in terms of these relationships. Its major conclusion is that the Third World countries occupy a subordinate position in the international economic and political systems which are seen as being structured primarily according to the needs of the developed countries. Developed countries maintain their dominant position and continue their own process of development at the expense of the developmental needs of the Third World countries. The penetration of Third World countries by multinational corporations, the political objectives and foreign aid policies of developed countries, the subordinate position of Third World countries in the international market and credit system, all are seen as aspects of this dependency phenomenon. Just as important, dependency relationships are seen as reproducing themselves in the structure of internal relationships. Underdeveloped countries are seen as being polarized between the urban sector, whose interests are often allied with the developed countries, and the rural sector which exists

in an exploitative relationship to the urban sector. As a result of this overall structure of dependency, Third World countries are seen as having little chance of achieving self-sustained internal growth or modernization in the Western sense as presumed by the previous developmental models. Indeed as Third World countries remain within this system over time they encounter increasingly serious internal difficulties and a deterioration of their position in international trade and finance.

As is evident, the dependency model presents a view of development and of the problems of Third World countries that is fundamentally different from previous modernization models. This difference reflects the fact that earlier theories of modernization can be viewed as by-products of classical Western social theory which stressed the evolutionary nature of the social developmental process and role of ideas and values. The dependency model, in contrast, can be seen as a counterpart of earlier theories of imperialism, particularly the marxist-leninist concept of imperialism, reformulated from the point of view of the underdeveloped countries (Portes, 1976). The implications of dependency models are likewise radically different. Effective national development comes to be interpreted as the "liberation from dependency," a concept which could mean anything from the formation of Third World raw material cartels to revolutions of national liberation. In any event, the generally optimistic picture which was presented by previous theories of modernization and which assumed a basic mutuality of interest between developed and Third World countries has been confronted by an alternative theory of development that presents a pessimistic view of development and is based on a conflictual model of the world system.

Aside from the major elements of the dependency approach presented

in this brief overview, it is important to stress some additional aspects of the dependency model, aspects which are of direct relevance to an understanding and assessment of the work done under the media imperialism approach. First, rather than being a set of propositions that are universally valid, the dependency approach is based on an analysis of the particular historical context of dependent societies. The relationships of dependency can only be understood in the context of concrete historical situations. This then requires that an analysis be based on an examination of the specific historical forces and factors involved in a nation's incorporation into and situation within a system of extra-national relationships. Thus, in an attempt to understand the notion of dependency, one must be wary of talking about dependent societies or the relationships of dependency in general without specifying the concrete historical situation in which societies and relationships exist (Villamil, 1979),

A second important aspect of the dependency analysis is its emphasis on the role of extra-national forces and factors that create and support the maintainence of underdevelopment in the Third World. Particular importance is laid on the role that transnational corporations play in Third World countries (Sunkel and Fuenzalida, 1979). Yet, while in the present stage of the capitalist world economy, the transnational corporations are the dominant institution, the dependent condition of a particular nation cannot be regarded only in terms of the domination by transnational interests and other external forces and factors. The condition of dependency involves the dynamic relationship between internal factors such as a nation's class structure and history and external factors such as transnational corporations, international financial institutions and so on.

Dependency analysis is essentially a dialectical analysis which stresses the complex manner in which internal and external factors operate over time. Underdevelopment and dependency are not simply the result of "external constraints" on peripheral societies, nor can dependency be operationalized solely with reference to external factors (Valenzuela and Valenzuela, 1979). Fernando Cardoso, one of the major figures of the dependency school, has noted that in the dissemination of the dependency model, particularly in the United States, the attention to external variables - "the intervnetion of the CIA in foreign policy, the invisible and Machiavellian hand of the multinationals, etc." - while justified and necessary, has come to assume priority over an understanding of the specific and historically situated internal factors that operate in the maintenance of the dependent status of peripheral societies (Cardodo, 1977:14). This misplaced emphasis lends itself well to grand theories of conspiracy, but does little to develop an understanding of the complexities of Third World societies and their relations to the developed world.

A third aspect of the dependency approach is its theoretical status and methodology. The dependency approach does not pretend to be a precisely articulated model comprised of formal and testable propositions (Villamil, 1979). Rather it is more correct to see the approach as, in the words of Richard Fagen, a "way of framing" the problems of underdevelopment. The approach is "in reality a conceptual framework, a set of concepts, hypothesized linkages, and above all an optic that attempts to locate and clarify a wide range of problems" (Fagen, 1977:7). Given the wide range of complex problems and relationships which the approach attempts to explore, isolating and narrowly defining a set of variables and relationships

does violence to the dialectical interrlationships among the elements of dependency. It is a bias on behalf of such formalistic models which, while conforming well to North American ideas of social science, has resulted in the overemphasis on the external factors of dependency and the neglect of the factors operating at the national level and the dynamic movement that exists within the entire complex whole. As Cardoso notes, "In the struggle that takes place among the components there are no 'dimensions of variables' at stake, but tensions between interests, values, appropriations of nature and society, all of which are unequal and in opposition. Therefore, when speaking of 'dependent capitalist development,' one speaks necessarily and simultaneously of socio-economics exploitation, unequal distribution of income, the private appropriation of the means of production, and the subordination of some economies to others. On the other hand, one also necessarily inquires inot conditions under which this order of affairs is negated" (Cardoso, 1977: 17).

As is hopefully obvious, it is within the broad context of the dependency approach that most of the substantive concerns of communication scholars and researchers investigating media imperialism can be located. If one were to view the intellectual history of development thinking in the 1970's, one would conclude that the formulation of the media imperialism approach was, objectively speaking, developed as a corollary to the dependency model. Nonetheless, in spite of the great affinities that exist, there seems to be very little active interaction between social scientists doing work within the dependency approach and communication researchers doing work on media imperialism. Those working in sociology, economics and political science generally tend to be ignorant of the work of communication

researchers in this area or even tend to dismiss communications as an unimportant element in the overall structures of dependency. Aside from an occasional perfunctory citation or quote from the works of someone like A.G. Frank, a dependency theorist whose work, written in English, is generally more accessible but should not be taken as the definitive statement of the dependency model (Valenzuela and Valenzuela, 1979), communication researchers likewise rarely explicitly acknowledge what is happening elsewhere in developmental studies. Of course there are exceptions. Social scientists such as Osvaldo Sunkel and Edmundo F. Fuenzalida, associated with the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex, show a keen appreciation and knowledge of the issues of culture and communication and attempt to relate such issues to the larger concerns of dependency (Sunkel and Fuenzalida, 1975, 1979). The work of Rita Cruise O'Brien, also associated with the Institute of Development Studies, provides excellant examples of how an awareness of the larger dimensions of dependency can inform a study of media imperialism (Cruise O'Brien, 1979). Salinas and Paldán (1979) have applied a dependency analysis to a discussion of culture in a dependent society. Lee (1978), basing himself primarily on the works of A.G. Frank, has used the dependency theory to discuss the theoretical and methodological aspects of the work on media imperialism.

Yet such work has made, as yet, little impact. It is unfortunately the case that many communication scholars, researchers and students address the topic of media imperialism with little or no acquaintance with the dependency approach and, failing to see the broad context in which media imperialism falls, make numerous mistakes and misinterpretations that could

easily have been avoided. Social scientists, on the other hand, fail to see in the development of modern communications media a new and extremely important dimension of dependency that has grave economic, political and cultural consequences. They fail to appreciate that the present stage of transnational capitalism is only possible in the context of the development of new communications and information media with vast new capabilities. Future developments in communications will play an important role in determining the direction in which transnational capitalism will progress.

Yet, as this discussion is primarily directed toward communication researchers, its emphasis is on how an appreciation of the dependency model can aid the study of media imperialism. If progress is to be made in the study of media imperialism, it is necessary that those working in this area integrate their efforts into the larger framework of dependency analysis in order to draw upon its concepts, formulations and insights to inform their own work. Drawing from the above discussion of the dependency model, the following brief comments and assessments are offered about the present state of work on media imperialism to demonstrate how the dependency approach can both strengthen the work on media imperialism and point to new issues and areas which need to be explored.

As noted earlier, a major focus of the media imperialism approach has been on the role of transnational corporations or media interests in shaping communications between developed and Third World countries. While such a focus is, of course, a necessary corrective to earlier models of communication and development and does perform the very necessary task of establishing the overwhelming dominant role of transnational interests in

world communications, such a focus nonetheless leads to an imbalanced perspective that views media imperialism as primarily the consequence of factors external to a dependent society. This tends to ignore, as noted above, the forces and factors operating on a national and local level that assist and react against the perpetuation of media imperialism and, more importantly, it tends to obscure the complex relationships and dynamics that exist among the external and internal factors and forces. Thus it is important that, under the rubic of the media imperialism approach, studies of transnational communicators and media be complemented with studies focusing on communications media and interests at the national level. Such studies would attempt to place the development and function of the various communications media in the context of the class and power dynamics that operate within a nation and in the context of that nation's status as a dependent society. For example, what groups control the media and to what ends are the communications and information media put; what role does a nation's media play in maintaining or changing the structure of power in society. Such questions need to be explored and then linked to an analysis of how that nation and its media is tied into the international system of domination and dependence. The need for such studies is all the more important given the movement among some Third World nations towards the intervention of the state through the formulation of national communication policies. To many observers at the international level, such a movement represents a progressive move to overcome the consequences of media imperialism. But can such a general assessment be valid if practically next to nothing is known about the factors and forces that operate at the national level. Only with an analysis at the national level can one hope

to determine whether the communication policies of a particular country represents a progressive attempt to deal with the problems of media imperialism or is just a reflection of a minor realignment of internal forces that does not threaten transnational interests in any meaningful way.

Closely linked to the need for an analysis of internal factors and the dynamics between such factors and external forces and interest is the need for an analysis of media imperialism as a historical phenomenon, that is how it exists in particular historical situations and periods. The media imperialism approach, tied as it is to the pressing concerns over current problems, does not have much to offer about the role of communications media in relations of domination and dependence prior to World War II. It is important to note, however, that the concern over media imperialism by communication scholars does not represent any radical new breakthrough in the study of communications, but more a revival of an older concern, perhaps best represented in the work of Harold Innis, of the relations that have existed throughout human history between the development of communications media and the extension of domination by particular societies. It is thus important to place the study of media imperialism in a larger historical perspective, not only to give the approach more breadth and power, but also to reveal the extremely complex interrelationships that have existed over time, and exist at present, between the development and expansion of communications media and the forces and factors associated with the relations of dominance and dependence. Only with knowledge of media imperialism as a concrete historical phenomenon operating in the larger context of domination, can one hope to assess and formulate effective and meaningful strategies to over come it.

A third concern that the media imperialism approach must address if it is to progress is the issue of culture. While a great deal of the concern over media imperialism is motivated by a fear of the cultural consequences of the transnational media - of the threat that such media poses to the integrity and the development of viable national cultures in Third World societies - it is the one area where, aside from anecdotal accounts, little progress has been achieved in understanding specifically the cultural impact of transnational media on Third World societies. All too often the institutional aspects of transnational media receive the major attention while the cultural impact, which one assumes to occur, goes unaddressed in any detailed manner. Generally a perception of the cultural consequences of the content of various media products is based on a view of the mass media as primarily manipulative agents capable of having direct, unmediated effects on the audience's behavior and world view. No one, of course, can deny that the study of the cultural dimension of the media is one of the most difficult areas of communications studies. There is very little consensus as to the basic formulation of the questions to be asked, much less agreement on methods and criteria. In recent years there have been attempts to address within the context of a dependency perspective the question of culture, both in terms of the impact of media products and in terms of the broader impact that dependency has on the overall structure of human relationships within a dependent society (see, for example Dagnino, 1973; Sunkel and Fuenzalida, 1975; Schiller, 1976; Mattelart, 1978; Burton and Franco, 1978; Salinas and Paldán, 1979). As yet, however, no compelling formulation has emerged to guide future work. Nonetheless the issue of culture must be addressed. One avenue of research

that shows hope of progress particularly to communication researchers is the work by literary scholars and some communication researchers which attempts to explicate the symbolic universe that is contained in the content of the mass media in dependent societies and relate this to the overall system of dependency (Dorfman and Mattelart, 1975; Kunzle, 1978, Flora and Flora, 1978). Generally such studies demonstrate how the relations of dominance dependence are reproduced within the content of the popular media. Such works are useful to communication researchers in that they establish a baseline for the content of the media which enables researchers to say something about the products of the transnational media in dependent societies. The next step - going from a discussion of the content of the popular media to a study of its actual impact on the lives and human relationships of Third World populations - is, of course an extremely difficult step that represents a major challenge.

Another necessary direction of advance is broadening the study of media imperialism from a primary focus on the mass media to an analysis of other communications and information media and associated questions and areas of concerns. In spite of the popular conception held by many communication researchers who address the topic, media imperialism is not simply the flow of particular products of the mass media such as television programs or news stories between the developed countries and Third World nations. Such a narrow view ignores or obscures many important dimensions of the process and misinterprets the basic concern. Fortunately, as shown by the works of Cruise O'Brien (1979) and Golding (1977) on the transference of communication technology and professional models, and of Schiller (1979) on transnational data flow, progress has already been made

in defining and analysing media imperialism with the scope and breadth that the phenomenon requires. Such efforts must be continued and expanded.

Finally attention must be paid to the development of the media imperialism approach as a theoretical endeavor. As noted earlier, the lack of theoretical development that would match the empirical progress already achieved in this area endangers the underlying critical outlook and concern behind this work. Yet one should be very cautious in the construction of theoretical formulations. The basic question which the media imperialism approach should seek to explore both on a theoretical and empirical level is: how does modern communication - its media, its practices and its products - relate to the larger structures and dynamics of dependency. The theoretical formulation and the development of a specific methodology should match the breadth of this basic concern. In approaching media imperialism as a theoretical proposition, one should keep well in mind the earlier noted comments by Cardoso and others. An attempt to define both dependency and media imperialism as a precisely articulated model consisting of strictly defined variables and relationships totally distorts the basic notions behind these two areas of work. Attempting to reduce the notions of dependency and media imperialism to a set of narrow empirical propositions replaces the dynamism and organicism essential to these ideas with a set of formal, mechanistic relationships.

One must recognize that empirical social science as it has developed today is not equipped and does not have the tools to study the phenomenon of dependency or media imperialism in the manner in which these notions were originally conceived. Unfortunately the response by some in the social science community to this problem has been to redefine dependency and media

imperialism in order to make them amenable to the available empirical techniques. Thus for some social scientists dependency is seen as a set of correlations between data on trade patterns between developed and Third World countries and levels of GNP. For some communication researchers, media imperialism is largely a question of how many episodes of Kojak are shown on Bolivian television. While such information is no doubt useful, and while not denying that there are numerous discreet aspects of both dependency and media imperialism that can be profitably examined in this manner, what is being studied through primary reliance on such narrow measures is not the phenomenon dependency or media imperialism. In the attempt to move the study of media imperialism from detailed description to a concern with wider theoretical issues, it is necessary to eschew a narrow conception of what theory is and what it is supposed to do. It is far better to utilize the broad notion of the purpose and use of theory that is best described in Fagen's words, that is seeing a "theory" of media imperialism as "a conceptual framework, a set of concepts, hypothesized linkages, and above all an optic that attempt to locate and clarify a wide range of problems" (Fagen, 1977:7). Hopefully in this manner, both the critical import of the notion of media imperialism and the complexity of the phenonemon which such a notion attempts to describe will be maintained and appreciated.

NOTES

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